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THE ABILITY OF GERMAN POLITICAL PARTIES
TO RESOLVE THE GIVEN PROBLEMS:
THE SITUATION IN 1982

by

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The Ability of German Political Parties to resolve
the given Problems: the Situation in 1982

Dr. Karl Hohmann

My talk today will not attempt to report on the stage now reached in academic discussion of the capacity of the parties in the German Bundestag to resolve conflicts, nor will it offer you the results of the latest opinion polls in the Federal Republic of Germany. I should add, before continuing, that the parties represented in the Bundestag are as follows: the Christian Democratic and Christian Social Union of Germany (the CDU/CSU); the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); and the Free Democratic Party (F.D.P.). My wish is to inform you of my observations on this subject, both past and present, or - to be more precise - during recent years. In so doing, I can draw on experience gathered over a long period as a member of Ludwig Erhard's staff when he was Minister of Economics and later Federal Chancellor. Not least among this experience is the knowledge gained in preparing for three Bundestag elections and numerous regional elections.

My talk will deal with the problems and conflicts of contemporary West German society; the worries of many people both here and elsewhere about the future (with many people in West Germany speaking openly of their anxiety) and the present situation of the parties and the government. Finally, I shall try to answer my own question as to whether, or to what extent, the German parties fulfil one of their most

important tasks. As the "Law on Political Parties" of 1967 points out, this consists in introducing the political aims which they have enunciated into the process of policy formation. The complexity of the problem may be illustrated by reference to an incident which I heard of during a conference organized by the Walter Raymond Foundation.

Speaking at the 1979 German Tax Advisers Congress, the Federal Minister of Finance, Herr Matthöfer, made the point that, given the political realities of today, the existing ownership of property and the existing privileges will hardly ever be subject to serious challenge. A year later in 1980, the Vice-President of the supreme German court (the Federal Constitutional Court), Professor Wolfgang Zeidler, had the following to say in a speech to the German Law Congress:

"One could almost believe that Hans Matthöfer even surpassed Ulrike Meinhof (a former leading German terrorist) when he made that statement: in formulating this precise sentence, he succeeded in furnishing a convincing justification for terrorism in a manner which she never achieved despite all her efforts as a writer. If this remark by the Federal Finance Minister were really to describe an effectively constituent principle of our political system, one could not with conviction contradict efforts to use force as a means of political action. Wherever the opportunity to carry out reforms is lacking, then revolution becomes legitimate!"

Although I cannot accept Professor Zeidler's viewpoint, the

link between the smooth functioning of the democratic institutions and the absence of illegitimate force is clear for all to see. During the last 15 years, this link has proved its strength on many occasions in West Germany. If the Government or the Parliament prove incapable of accommodating the claims of organized groups against the State or its intermediary agencies as part of the public interest, then that constitutes a danger to social stability as a whole. It is not only the will to carry out reforms but the very concrete ability to translate them into reality - if necessary against the wishes of minorities - which decides whether peace or discord will prevail within a given society. The fact that the political parties in themselves arrange for a balance between their interests and that Members of Parliament from one group reach an understanding with Members of Parliament from another group is an everyday feature of all Western democracies including West Germany. Indeed, it probably promotes the functioning of their systems rather than impairs them. Nevertheless, the question remains as to the limits to such bargaining. After all, if Parliament and the parties represented there see themselves merely as "closely linked coalitions between the elite of the State, the major companies and the employees' organizations - in other words as a coalition of big government, big business and big unions - that will spell the beginning of the end for a smoothly functioning parliamentarianism. In that case, those holding opposite views will have to look for fresh opportunities to express themselves outside the democratic system. Perhaps that will be on the streets in the manner we

experienced in the Federal Republic of Germany in the late Sixties and early Seventies.

But at the same time, it is noticeable in all German parties that the sensitivity to such distortions of the democratic process has increased. The SPD wants to be more and is more than the party of the trade unions. The CDU/CSU represents not only the middle class, the farming community and industry: it also embraces large numbers of employees, and manual workers in particular, among its voters. And the former middle-class party of the FDP is becoming a party which appears eligible for all social groups including wage earners. As the internal structure of the German parties undergoes necessary changes, so their claims to competency adapt accordingly and on an equal scale to the new circumstances. Each of the parties feels competent to handle every single issue and completely capable of resolving problems. But what continues to distinguish them apart from the given historic legacy (or perhaps one should call it "ballast") is their concept of the relationship between the citizen and the State, their economic philosophy, their assessment of the role of Christianity in politics and its role for citizens and society. These generate considerable friction in everyday political life, which frequently covers up the existing common interests.

All three parties of which we are speaking are people's parties in the sense that this is set out in their political programmes. Yet that must not blind us to the fact that the

concurrence between the parties and their target groups in society does not reach the depth of the concrete political measures taken. Major and wide-ranging themes have become dominant - in addition to freedom, justice, peace and solidarity, it is the concepts which characterize the problematic areas of politics without pointing to any solutions. In the light of its commitment to a highly varied grass-roots basis which is now drifting apart, the Federal German Government finds it increasingly difficult to take decisions and to implement them. But the Opposition is also experiencing difficulty in formulating concrete policies. The more the parties have thrown open their ranks to all, the more problematic the process of substantive policy formation has become and the more often there arises the question as to their ability to govern.

Not that the parties are interchangeable. But in the struggle to gain votes, they offer themselves to everyone - often at the expense of their programmatic image. Nevertheless, these three parties (the CDU/CSU, SPD and F.D.P.) do not cover the whole range of voters' wishes. That applies not only to local problems in district and regional elections which are not represented by the big parties, but also to the elections for the Bundestag. The central topics in this context are ecology and nuclear power; and these themes are starting to alter the unchanging party scene, to restructure the stock of party members and loyal voters, and to challenge the party programme. The citizens of today want answers to the problems raised by the protection of nature and the environment and

the use of nuclear energy. Where the established parties fail to provide convincing answers, this increases the chance for new groupings such as the "Greens". But a lot of changes are taking place at present so that any account of the distribution of forces can be nothing more than a kind of freeze-frame.

One of the reasons for the transitory nature of many of these groupings is their association with other issues such as alliances with Marxists. By the same token, the limitation of their political statements to one or two themes is too devoid of substance for many citizens. But the big parties are being increasingly forced to deal with the subject of the environment and of nuclear energy and to convince voters of their competence. This must be credited to the efforts undertaken by the "Greens", although at the same time it also threatens their political future as an independent force. The assumption that the ecological disputes will take on an peaceful character and that the violent clashes will become a thing of the past is a doubtful one. For some of the supporters of environmental protection and opponents of nuclear energy are more interested in the conflict per se. If those opposed to environmental pollution and the use of nuclear energy who are not represented by political parties were to start voicing their critical views via Parliament, that could help to render the dialogue more pertinent and objective. The ecological movement (as personified by the democratic Greens) would face a new objective. In wide sections of the population, distrust is growing of the extraparlimentary forms of oppositional action, since these are never quite free of the danger of abuse.

The capacity of the political parties to resolve the various problems will also have to be displayed in other fields, too, in future. One of these fields is that of the disputes resulting from the distribution of economic resources. In the past, the pace of economic growth over a period of many years led to a relatively high degree of social peace. Naturally, there have been strikes and lock-outs in West Germany, i.e. serious industrial disputes. Moreover, the overthrow of Willy Brandt as Federal Chancellor is not unjustifiably blamed in part on the exaggerated wage and salary demands submitted and enforced by the trade union with responsibility for the public services under the Social-Democratic trade union leader, Kluncker.

What form does the dispute assume when growth is modest or lacking? Can we still count on having representatives of the two sides of industry whose views will continue to guarantee social peace in West Germany? What would be the significance in this context of a change ^{from} a government under Schmidt to one under Kohl?

Let us begin with a change of government. As twenty years of CDU/CSU government from 1949 to 1969 under Chancellors Adenauer, Erhard and Kiesinger indicate, social peace will not be a priori endangered if Kohl becomes chancellor. I shall not go so far as to assume the opposite. Nevertheless, a change of government - and many speak in this context of a change of power - could bring the tension of the domestic

political scene to an end. As regards the trade unions, my assumptions are as follows. If the German trade unions remain stable within themselves and retain the capacity to neutralize exaggerated trends and if they overcome the present lingering crisis surrounding certain of their leaders in connection with the events in a large trade-union owned company - and in my opinion this is likely - then we shall retain relatively strong trade unions in West Germany. As proof of their democratic legitimation, they will also co-operate with CDU/CSU governments and permit a Federal Chancellor Kohl to govern our country successfully even if growth rates remain modest and if there is no likelihood of growth in private income in some cases.

But there are other opinions which militate against my optimistic prognosis. Let me quote Wolfgang Roth, the SPD spokesman on economic policy. Speaking some time ago at a symposium organized by the Ludwig Erhard Foundation, he had the following to say in reply to his own question: what would happen if there were no growth? Roth said that "if social peace were to be guaranteed, then the policy of promoting equality would have to be much more radical than hitherto. There would not only have to be a more even distribution of accrued resources, but also a more direct approach to the question of what should belong to whom? Nobody can be expected to remain reasonable and keep quiet if he gets nothing from the additional growth, unless perhaps he gets something of what is already there." Roth turned his attention to those who argue in favour of zero growth by

asking which forms of organization they wish to use in resolving future disputes in the resolution of disputes.

"Anyone who says airily that no more economic growth is necessary is also indirectly affirming that the social consensus and the social peace we have had during the last 30 years are now ended."

If that opinion were correct, then the Federal Republic of Germany would now be standing on the threshold of a major phase of her existence. The fact that this need not necessarily be the case results from^a clear-cut change in the conscious approach adopted by German society, a change in its set of values marked by the assignment of less importance to material things. Admittedly, this does not apply to the leadership of the organized groups such as the trade unions. In keeping with old traditions, they see the size of the annual wage increases as proof of their success. But is this also the case for the great mass of employees? Is not a reliable job in itself and the reduction of youth unemployment of greater importance than the ritual of the yearly struggle for more wages? The ecological disputes and the struggle to develop nuclear energy blunt the impact of wage demands because they bind considerable energies which could otherwise have been released in industrial disputes. Furthermore, strikes are not popular in West Germany. Those policies of the political parties directed towards promoting understanding and domestic peace can expect to gain wide support. A further explanation lies in the relatively high standard of living among the general population including the

broad masses - something which even demagogues cannot deny.

The authority of the German parties as "organized groups of politically like-minded persons" exercising a strong influence upon the shaping of the State above all in the composition of the popular assembly, the formation of the government, the choice of the Head of State and the activities of the public-law organizations - all of which are referred to in the Law on Political Parties of 1967 - this authority of the parties has suffered and been forced to accept losses. This took place (and is still taking place) in a sphere which falls under the very general heading of a "peace movement". When several hundred thousand mostly young persons gathered in Bonn last October for a so-called peace demonstration, they had a police permit for doing so: yet the Government and the parliamentary parties were in reality against this rally. Only outsiders of the political parties, above all from the ranks of the government coalition, put in an appearance. The established powers of the State looked on with a feeling of helplessness as a huge number of young persons gathered peacefully and apparently spontaneously (though in reality this was probably organized) alongside them or even against them in order to demonstrate for "peace". Although the expression "peace policy" appears in the political programme of each of the German parties, the latter had apparently not succeeded in convincing large sections of the young population that peace was safe in their hands. It must certainly be impossible for anyone to demonstrate that the German parties have been pursuing

anything other than a peace policy since their establishment. However, they have not succeeded in making this generally comprehensible and representing it in a convincing manner. The explanation probably lies in the fact that many people do not understand the position of the NATO states on questions of military equilibrium, the arms build-up with missiles and their stationing in Central Europe. Moreover, the Soviets have succeeded in drawing a veil over their internal and external policy of using force. A third point is the support now given to radicals in the light of the arms-race in East and West, because the parties have apparently lost contact with members of the young generation on these questions - a situation which has seldom or never occurred in West Germany.

A related problem lies in the increasing number of young Germans who refuse to perform military service for conscientious reasons. The right to refuse, on grounds of conscience, to render war service involving the use of arms is set out in Article 12a of our Constitution, although this then leads to an obligation to render a substitute service. In 1980, the number of applications by conscientious objectors amounted to approximately 54,000 and in 1981 to approximately 58,000. Not only the number of conscientious objectors is alarming at the present time but also - and this is even more serious - the fact that certain final-year grammar school boys avail themselves of this opportunity to the extent of 80 and 90 %. Quite a few people ask themselves in West Germany what consequences this trend might be

producing for the future of German society and, moreover, what motivation lies behind it. Is it really conscience? Or simple convenience? The German parties subscribe without exception to the right embodied in the Basic Constitutional Law to refuse military service for reasons of conscience. But they also see the dangers if an exceptional provision becomes the rule. The question of whether or not we can expect any changes seems to be a problem for the longer term. But perhaps this trend will change as certain fashions do.

There remain important issues which West Germany still has to resolve. These are:

- 1) Unemployment
- 2) Inflation
- 3) Public finance.

Is there such a thing as a typical pattern of policy among the three political parties? In the case of unemployment, the answer is a clear "yes". The historic legacy of the economic philosophy peculiar to each party to which I have already referred is very noticeable in this field. As regards the second case - inflation - the answer must remain speculative. In the third instance - public finance - there exist clear-cut phalanxes of forces and they offer opposite solutions. These phalanxes are the old fronts which are once more taking shape. There is the contrast between those in favour of collective solutions (usually in the form of a state-run economy) on the one hand, and those who advocate a free social market economy involving a completely different

approach.

To an observer who has gathered his experience outside Germany, this controversy may seem virtually incomprehensible. Nevertheless, it has historic roots in this country. After World War II when the problem was one of reconstructing a demolished Germany, the supporters of the two systems of political and economic management faced each other as implacable opponents. In the end, the advocates of the market-economy system gained the upper hand. In the first elections to the German Bundestag in 1949, the parties in favour of the Social Market Economy gained a victory. This decision not only concerned a question of economic policy, it also affected nearly all spheres of life in the State and in society. That was bound to be so, since there exists an indissoluble inter-relationship between the economic system and the overall state and social system. Walter Eucken spoke of the "interdependence of the systems" comprising the State, society and the economy. Dictatorship and a market economy cannot exist simultaneously in a State. Market-economy freedom and political freedom go hand in hand just as dictatorship and a regimented economy do.

A historic review of the first two decades in West Germany after World War II reveals the unique solutions applied to the problems of reconstruction. The methods adopted, corresponding as they did to the principles of a free market economy, engendered surprise and general admiration. The Social Market Economy had gained a wide measure of acceptance

among a broad section of the population as an economic system. This was transferred to the parties which represented these people, whilst the opponents of the system fell more and more in the esteem of public opinion. As a result, the Social Democrats finally came round to embracing the new line of approach when they adopted their Godesberg Programme of 1959.

The State where all this took place, the Federal Republic of Germany, differed from the minimal State proposed by the early Liberals in that it acquired the character of a strong State, and saw itself not only as the guarantor of the general conditions for a free political and economic society but also simultaneously enabled people to achieve a fresh self-awareness. Without this strong State emerging in line with the Basic Constitutional Law of 1949, the attempt in West Germany to build up a free society with a socially committed market economy on the shambles left behind by the war would probably have been doomed to failure. For a long period of time, it proved more attractive to most citizens than the concepts offered by the Socialists or Social Democrats. The parliamentary majority in favour of this policy determined the fate of the country for twenty years. The middle-class parties were believed more capable of coping with the largely economic problems confronting West Germany. This situation changed when other political problems began to dominate the scene - Ostpolitik, certain negative aspects of the economic boom, and signs of wear and tear among the CDU and the CSU.



At the same time, new developments began to emerge in regard to the central economic issues of unemployment, inflation and public finance. In view of the behaviour of the political parties when faced by the problems of the labour market, Holger Bonus of the University of Konstanz recently made the following apt remark: What we find today is ideological trench warfare conducted with extreme grimness; discussions are a thing of the past; in the intolerance and recklessness, one thrashes one another with chains of arguments as if they were bicycle chains.

What is the origin of this phenomenon? Well, in the first place, the problems of the labour market are highly complex and explosive today. This is recognized nearly everywhere. A further complication in the case of West Germany is that the problems on the labour market have appeared with considerable abruptness. Thirdly, these problems have not only remained politically unresolved since about the year 1971, they have even grown worse almost continuously.

However, any assessment of the parties' capacity to resolve problems in this sphere must also include the following point. The parties in West Germany still clearly differ to a very great degree in their fundamental political approach. The image of "people's parties" probably emerged for them in the 1950s much more because of the policy of that age than through any efforts of their own or through changes in the party programmes. Naturally, this circumstance becomes apparent whenever there is a need to take decisions and to

express a view on really important matters. Since the social policy pursued under the Social Market Economy no longer exercises any integrative effect and since economic policy has returned to being a purely technocratic policy and is thus no longer directed as a fundamental principle towards realizing a generally accepted set of values - values with which all groups can identify, irrespective of their party - the old ideological positions on decisive questions are continuously breaking down. The question of whether the parties bear political responsibility or whether they form the Government or the Opposition is of secondary importance.

One of the big parties, the SPD, is still dominated by the experience gathered in the world of consumer demand: its central issues are just treatment, the redistribution of resources and the protection of the weaker members of society. The other party, the CDU/CSU, attaches greater weight to other experiences: personal achievement, consideration for others, social responsibility and due reward for the successful. The recommendations for practical economic policy which flow from such a differing approach could hardly be more dissimilar and contrary. One philosophy calls for relief for the business community, tax cuts, and balanced public budgets through economy measures: the other recommends additional state expenditure, economic programmes and subsidies for certain investments.

Similar differences and disputes are discernible in the combating of inflation. However, these differences have been

put into proper perspective in West Germany. At the present time, the shortcomings as regards other overall economic goals - industrial growth, a high level of employment, and the achievement of balance in foreign trade and payments - weigh more heavily than the inflation rate, which is relatively moderate by international comparison.

However, the level of national debt is a more serious problem. Although West Germany lies in mid position in the table of comparable countries, the problem of national debt aggravates political discussion and the reputation of the government. This issue together with the threat of unemployment could form the external cause for a rupture in the present governing coalition between the SPD and the F.D.P. in Bonn, because apparently a majority of voters assume that the CDU/CSU possess greater competence at properly regulating public finance over the medium and long term. We shall have to wait for several years to prove the correctness of this assumption.

One feature common to all the German parties under discussion is their lack of courage in taking unpopular measures, i.e. doing whatever is necessary even if it does not win any general acclaim. This may be seen very clearly from a number of problems currently making the headlines in Germany after assuming scandalous proportions. They include a cut in public subsidies because these could only be financed on the same scale as hitherto by expanding the national debt. In other words, the current generation can only maintain its standards

by putting into debt coming generations, who in turn will the debts we are incurring now. One necessary change would be to amend the laws governing services - including social security. in these fields, there is approximate agreement between the F.D.P. (or major segments of it) and the CDU/CSU, i.e. between the Opposition and one of the two government parties which may form tomorrow's government.

The current scene in West Germany is marked by a wide measure of political disaffection, whose real origins lie, in my opinion, in the voters' weariness with party promises. The impression prevails that the parties are finding it difficult or impossible to cope with the problems confronting the Federal Republic of Germany as a State and also confronting modern German society. Whatever the issue at hand - the necessary cuts in the ballooning welfare institutions, a reduction in unemployment, balancing public finance, expanding on the requisite scale the use of nuclear energy or integrating the peace movement - everywhere one comes up against barriers which appear to obstruct the future. Sometimes, one gains the impression of self-paralysis. I would like to stress the point that my account is greatly influenced by the impressions of the current time. Yet, tomorrow, the situation may seem quite different. Why? Because Germans have learnt from their most recent history how to cope with more difficult problems than those of today.

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